

Tackling housing shortages in South Algonquin

By Mike Riley Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

At the South Algonquin Township meeting on June 1, council received and discussed a letter from CAO/clerk-treasurer Bryan Martin, about the lack of long-term housing in the municipality and what to do about it. After discussing it and revealing some potential solutions to this problem, including working with the District of Nipissing Social Services Administration Board and community stakeholders, council agreed that long term housing solutions would likely materialize within the next several years. Mayor Jane Dumas introduced Martin's report to council and asked him if he wanted to provide any highlights and/or feedback on it. Martin said that as part of the April 20 Economic Development Committee meeting, one of the concerns and discussions raised by councillor Bongo Bongo related to the lack of long-term housing in South Algonquin. The South Algonquin Strategic Plan and the Community Safety and Well-Being Plan has also identified lack of long-term affordable housing as a major issue. "We certainly have some short-term housing available in the community but very little long-term rentals and very few homes available on the market for sale," he says. Martin noted that Dumas had worked very hard with the Nipissing District Housing Corporation to get them to bring additional housing to the community. He said he'd had some discussions with Tracy Bethune, manager of the NDHC, and it's clear that they're working toward something as it relates to redevelopment within South Algonquin for public housing. "As soon as they've got their I's dotted and their T's crossed, they're hoping to be able to make some form of announcement," he says. The NDHC manages over 830 rent- geared to income and market rental units within the District of Nipissing. Its mandate is "to provide safe and affordable housing to those who need it most, as well as support healthy secure communities for its tenants." The DNSSAB is the corporation's sole shareholder and its service manager. In addition to working with the DNSSAB, Martin thought they still needed to work with the greater community to make long term housing options happen. He said that their businesses, many tourist in nature, are giving up units at their own accommodations for employees that they could be renting and that others are having hard time keeping employees because they don't have accommodations for them and they have nowhere to stay on a permanent basis. "So, I think there's a lot of work to be done and I don't have a magic answer at this point, but there's further analysis and review necessary by staff and a lot of hard work by the partners within the community to try to bring forward a housing plan that is going to work," he says. Martin said that the District of Nipissing is their housing provider and they pay a levy to them to provide those services, and he hoped that during the next term of office, they'll see the fruition from some of the hard work that council has done at the housing board level. Dumas thanked Martin for the acknowledgement of her efforts regarding housing, and said that with COVID-19 unfortunately, priorities had to be revamped and that happened at DNSSAB, with federal and provincial funding coming in for homelessness and for people losing homes due to COVID-19 and a worsening economic situation. "DNSSAB is very much aware of the fact that South Algonquin wants to go forward with this and it's the appropriate way to do it, where the social services board goes out and gets a second or third partner and work together. I know they're doing that with agencies within South Algonquin too, they're having this dialogue. I'm optimistic that in the next term of council we will see some fruition from the work that's been done during this time period," she says. Marianne Zadra is the communications and executive coordinator with the DNSSAB and says that creating affordable housing is a priority throughout the Nipissing district. "While there are no projects currently underway in South Algonquin, the DNSSAB, along with NDHC are exploring all options and opportunities at this time that could lead to more affordable housing in the future," she says. Bongo spoke next at the meeting, saying that the lack of long-term housing was a huge concern for the public and for the entire township, so he was pleased to hear that the lobbying efforts are taking place. He mentioned that they had previously discussed the rising number of trailers appearing on private properties in the municipality, which he thought was an effect of this long term housing shortage. "Of course, we'll talk about that when we look at our Official Plan and zoning bylaws to see how we can give our residents the flexibility they need to get creative with their housing options," he says. Bongo asked Martin if they could talk about possible regulation of short-term rentals too help out the long-term rental market in South Algonquin when they discuss the Official Plan and the zoning bylaws. Martin said they could, that it was at council's discretion when to do so. Dumas said that she knows some neighbouring municipalities are looking closely at regulating short term rentals. "Whereas in the past, a cottage was used by a family for two or three weeks or a couple of months, this has been extended and this impacts our landfill and many things within the community," she says. "So, I think it is something going forward in the Official Plan process, that it would certainly be something to have that dialogue."